

SILVER, BARLEY AND THE EXILE EXPERIENCE

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of Naomi bas Shlomo HaKohen, Rebbetzin Dr. Naomi Baumgarten, a"h.

The Talmud (Chulin 92a) cites a verse in Hoshea (3:2): "So I bought her for me for fifteen pieces of silver, and a chomer-measure of barley, and a lesech-measure of barley." The Talmud elaborates: "Pieces of silver:" these are the righteous. . . "And a chomer-measure of barley and lesech-measure of barley:" these are the forty-five righteous men on account of whom the world continues to exist."

The Maharsha notes that the righteous are allegorized using two different terms within the same verse: they, without any quantity assigned, are called "silver," and then, with a quantity of 45, are called "barley." The reason for this, the Maharsha writes, is rooted in the context in which the righteous are viewed.

Generally speaking, the nation of Israel, when they listen to Hashem and obediently fulfill His dictates, are referred to by the term "silver." Conversely, when they do not listen, they are categorized as "slag." The genesis of this comparison can be found with a description of the experience of the exile in Egypt: "For they are your people, and your inheritance, which you brought forth out of Egypt, from the midst of the furnace of iron (Melachim 1 8:51)." The furnace is where the impurities are removed from the metal. After going through the process, two substances remain: the pure metal, the pure silver, and the spoils, the refuse, the slag. When the people are "pure," they are silver; otherwise, they are slag.

We see from Egypt that the experience in exile is a purification process. The verse terms Egypt "the furnace of iron," the place where metal is purified. Exile is an experience designed to remove impurities from the nation of Israel. It is one during which the bad from within us should be removed. Once exile concludes, we are a better nation, a nation rid of impurities, free of contamination. When the verse in Hoshea refers to silver, the Talmud is telling us that it refers to the righteous of the nation of Israel at a time when the nation itself is like silver - when the nation is not in exile, after having undergone the purification process exile provides.

However, when the nation does find itself in exile, a different term is used to describe the righteous,

and the people of Israel, in general. We find that Rabi Elazar said (Pesachim 87b) that "'Hashem only exiled Israel among the nations in order that proselytes might join them, for it is said: 'And I will sow her to Me in the land:' surely a man sows a se'ah (a small measure) in order to harvest many kor (a large measure)!"

The Maharsha explains that when the nation is in exile, they are experiencing a form of punishment. G-d could have exacted His punishment on the nation of Israel in many different ways. Yet, he chose exile, the dispersion of the people all over the world, living in foreign lands amongst foreign people. Why was this method of punishment chosen? Rabi Elazar says so that the other nations of the world will see how the nation of Israel serves G-d. They will see the nation's dedication and steadfast devotion to Him. They will see how the nation dutifully performs His commandments and studies His Torah. They will learn, from the example set before them, about true service of the One and Only G-d. And from this example, the nations will follow suit: people will convert.

When the nation is in exile, they are compared to barley, to produce. Just as a few seeds can produce a bountiful harvest, so too can a few people, scattered to and fro, bring forth a large scale sanctification of the name of G-d. In exile, there are indeed a set number of righteous people who sustain the world. Because these individuals are in exile, and in exile they are supposed to be the catalyst of growth in the service of G-d, they are termed "'barley.'"

We are in the midst of the Three Weeks - the time of sadness that commemorates the entrance of the nation into exile. Today, we still find ourselves in that exile. We are indeed a nation scattered throughout the world. From the passage in Chulin, we learn what we are to draw from our experience in exile. For one, we are supposed to undergo a purification process while in exile. We are supposed to take this difficult experience and make it one from which we will, hopefully - very soon, emerge better people, both individually and collectively. Exile is also a time during which we are supposed to stand out from our neighbors. We are supposed to act in a way that draws attention to us, because of our refined character, our evident devotion to proper service of G-d and His Torah. We are supposed to be a people whom others desire to emulate, to the extent that they want to join our ranks. These tasks to be accomplished in exile are related: if we spend the time working on ourselves, becoming better people, removing those serious character flaws, we, just by living our daily lives, will become a people worthy of emulating. However, if we ignore the goal of our exile, and become entrenched in mundane everyday life, we will have done nothing to differentiate ourselves in the realm of spirituality and service of G-d, and we will have failed to live up to the challenge exile presents.
